



Tourism team's creativity builds on Pasaquan's restoration

OVERVIEW

Pasaquan is a four-acre art environment in Buena Vista, Ga., consisting of six major structures, more than 900 feet of painted masonry fence, painted totems, decorative walkways, sculptures, and other art and artifacts. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is considered among the most important visionary art environments in the United States.

Eddie Owens Martin, who grew up in Buena Vista and introduced himself as St. EOM, was the creator of Pasaquan. At age 14, he moved to New York City and spent several decades there creating art until his mother died, at which point he returned to Buena Vista and transformed the former rural farm into Pasaquan over the next 30 years. A self-taught artist, St. EOM was influenced by many traditions, including Mesoamerican, African and Eastern art, but the content of his work was constructed from utopian visions of a future people called Pasaquanians he experienced throughout life.

CHALLENGE

Since St. EOM's death in 1980, The Pasaquan Preservation Society — a private, not-for-profit organization — had been caring for the site and opening it to the public two to three times per year. In 2014, the society approached Kohler Foundation, Inc. of Kohler, Wis., about taking on the safeguarding efforts, and Kohler agreed to conduct a full-scale restoration. A further partnership with Columbus State University, a unit of the University System of Georgia, was developed to own and operate the site for regular, year-round leisure visitation and groups following the three-year restoration.

Community leaders immediately realized that they were receiving the gift of a lifetime. Reopening Pasaquan would mean a steady stream of visitors and new money into the local economy. However, the community was not ready for visitors.

Business was slow in downtown Buena Vista, the county seat of Marion County, located approximately 30 miles southeast of Columbus. The majority of buildings were empty and deteriorating. There were only two bed and breakfast inns; one RV park and a few restaurants with limited hours. There was only one small grocery store in town and one in the county for visitors to restock their coolers or pick up supplies.

SOLUTION

Understanding that the community was in desperate need for assistance in developing their tourism infrastructure and products, the Georgia Tourism Product Development staff offered assistance through the Tourism Resource Team Program. A team of 10 experts began

Attraction

- Pasaquan, a four-acre art environment listed on the National Register of Historic Places

Project

- Tourism Product Development in Marion County

Program

- Tourism Product Development Resource Team

Key Partners

- Georgia Department of Economic Development, Tourism Division
- Georgia Council for the Arts
- Pasaquan Preservation Society
- Kohler Foundation, Inc.
- City of Buena Vista
- Marion County
- Marion County Chamber of Commerce
- Marion County Industrial Development Authority
- Columbus State University

Georgia Travel Region

- Presidential Pathways



ST. EOM'S PASAQUAN
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

working with Marion County and Buena Vista to understand the community dynamics, politics and obstacles to tourism development over the past 30 years as well as future opportunities.

The resulting 140-page master plan for tourism product development included recommendations for how the county could organize its tourism efforts, develop downtown businesses and lodging options, and market its assets to travelers who will be interested in visiting Pasaquan as well as other artistic, historic and recreational opportunities in the region. With the addition of new tourism products in this market, visitors can extend stays and leave more money within the community through lodging, restaurants, shopping and more.

To help the community accomplish its tourism plan, the Tourism Product Development staff established a system of partnerships with regional and state organizations. The Meriwether County Chamber of Commerce, Columbus State University's Department of Communication and Department of Geography, the Presidential Pathways Travel Association and others offered expertise, support and tools to accomplish goals in the new tourism master plan.

RESULTS

Since completion of Pasaquan's restoration in summer 2016, ownership of the property has transferred to the Columbus State University Foundation, and its use will be directed by Professor Mike McFalls in the university's Department of Art. The site is set to open in October 2016 and will maintain regular operating hours for visitors, events, programming and educational activities.

For the first time in recent history, the elected bodies of Marion County and the City of Buena Vista are working together toward a common goal of tourism development. Patronage for existing businesses has steadily increased, leading to expansions and new businesses opening. A local investor has opened an independent grocery store that will be the first full-service grocer in the community since the 1990s. Historic buildings downtown are being brought back to life, a historic preservation society is being developed and a local artist guild has formed.

Georgia Tourism and Columbus State University worked together to craft a marketing and public relations plan, and media around the world have been talking about the excitement of Pasaquan's reopening. Among the most exciting of the media coverage is CNN naming Pasaquan one of the "World's Top 16 Places to Visit in 2016."

Business is booming for the two bed and breakfasts in town. Local caterers say business is better than ever. Local stores are selling t-shirts and other Pasaquan souvenirs.

Most impressively, the Marion County Chamber of Commerce, which was functionally defunct before this project, has renovated a storefront on the town square for use as the Chamber of Commerce and a Visitor Center for the county. Although the community is only one year into its tourism development program, the results of their hard work are clear. The influx of visitors for Pasaquan has already transformed the community, and guidance from Georgia Tourism has set up the community for years of economic development throughout Buena Vista, Marion County and the region.

“The relationship between Georgia Tourism, Marion County and Pasaquan has been phenomenal for our small community and region. Their ability to pull together individuals and other resources to assist with each phase of this process has been unprecedented. They not only understand the overall effect that Pasaquan will have on the region and the state, but they also understand our unique community and show us potential that we never saw.”

- Deborah H. Ford, President
Marion County, Georgia, Chamber of Commerce



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